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## EXPOSITORY PREACHING.

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### I.

#### INTRODUCTORY — THE BIBLICAL ELEMENT IN THE MODERN SERMON.

ONE of the finest chapters in that most suggestive book, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*, by Dr. Edwin Hatch, is the chapter on Greek and Christian rhetoric. Dr. Hatch declares that Greek rhetoric created the Christian sermon, and that many a modern preacher is the lineal descendant of the old time sophist, who boasted of his ability to take any side of any subject, and, by the art of the orator, please, persuade, and carry the people. "Christianity came into the educated world in the simple dress of a prophet of righteousness ; but round it thronged a race of eloquent talkers, who persuaded it to change its dress and to assimilate its language to their own. It seemed thereby to win a speedier and completer victory, but it purchased conquest at the price of reality ; with that its progress stopped. There has been an element of sophistry in it ever since." The meaning of Dr. Hatch is very clear to anyone brought up on the average New England sermon of fifty years ago. The object of that preaching was to present a theme in logical order and rhetorical dress. The sermon did not come, "like the volcano's tongue of flame, up from the burning core below," but it came from the text-book of theology, and the treatise on sacred oratory. It had more of Demosthenes and Cicero than of Isaiah and Paul. It had more affinity with the orations against Catiline than with the invectives of Hosea against Israel. In other words, it was theologically Christian, but in its form and method pagan. In this paper we maintain that the method as well as the truth in Christian preaching should be

determined by the great revelation of God recorded in the sacred Scriptures. What is called "expository preaching" is indeed often a weariness to the flesh, and consists simply in a running series of comments loosely attached to some passage of Scripture, like the psalm book in Longfellow's *Miles Standish*:

Printed in Amsterdam, the words and the music together,  
Rough-hewn angular notes, like stones in the walls of the church-yard,  
*Darkened* and *overhung* by the running vine of the verses.

Nevertheless, the constant discussion concerning exposition in the pulpit shows the craving of the people, not, indeed, for loose, disjointed comment, but for a saturation of modern preaching with biblical spirit and biblical forms of thought, the demand that our students shall sit, not chiefly at the feet of Quintilian and Cicero and Burke and Webster, but at the feet of Hosea, Isaiah, Paul, and John.

The Bible is the record of the self-revelation of God through a historical process. This conception is fundamental in preaching. Some conceptions of the Bible are utterly unfruitful. If we think of it as an aëreolite, dropped out of the sky, we may worship, but we cannot use it. If we think of it as a Christian Koran divinely dictated to some human amanuensis, we may obey, but we cannot really study it. But endlessly fruitful is the conception of the Bible, which sees in it a series of redemptive acts. With God, as with us, actions speak louder than words. Words are but the *post-factum* statement. The real revelation is in the divine deed; in the fact that God went forth before the armies of Israel, rather than in the song which celebrates the fact; in the fact that Christ came from heaven to earth, rather than in Simeon's greeting of the Christ-child in the temple. As Professor Simon has it, "the Bible is the record of the progressive entrance of God into the life of man." Hence, biblical history must always be of immense service to the Christian preacher. To study the development of ideas concerning righteousness, purity, immortality, ritual, salvation, in Israel's history, is simply to study the life of God in Israel. History, then, becomes a living organism, and such study is really a branch of biology. On one side we are studying the evolution of Israel as a nation; on

the other side we are studying the revelation of Jehovah in the life of this people. Evolution is the revelation seen from below ; revelation is the evolution seen from above. God elected this one nation for the sake of humanity, and manifested himself uniquely, amazingly, in the life of this one people, that he might permeate the lives of all men that dwell on all the face of the earth.

Now, if the truth of God has thus come into the world through the history, that truth can never be severed from its original manifestation. We are to study, in the phrase of Dr. George A. Gordon, the "ascertained path of the transforming influence as it came upon man in the past." To take the idea out of its setting is to modify the idea itself. To preach it apart from its historical vehicle is like taking a plant out of its habitat, and presenting it as a dried specimen in some herbarium. It is to take the bird out of its nest in the thicket, and set it up as a stuffed specimen on a wooden peg—a thing of sawdust and glassy eyes. We can never understand the doctrine of immortality, unless we see it as it was divinely revealed to man. We can never know God as he is, if we try to expound simply theoretic theology, without regard to the way in which he made himself known to man. We are not preachers of a philosophy of the universe ; we are not bearers of a humanly constructed theodicy. We are interpreters of a divine revelation, which occurred in human history and which can never be separated from that history without serious loss and the permanent deterioration of the message.<sup>1</sup>

The preacher needs the biblical element also, because his own life is a continuation of the biblical history ; it is at the same time to be tested by that history and is to form a continuation of it. The preacher's message is the same as that of the apostles. Apostolic succession is not only apostolic success, but it is the possession of the apostolic spirit. They which are of the faith are the children of faithful Abraham. They are divine apostles who are filled with the spirit of the apostles.

<sup>1</sup> "There is not in all this foolish world anything so utterly vain as abstract preaching, the presentation of ideas totally disengaged from the times and persons in which they first appeared, the discussion of moral truth out of all relation to the souls that brought it into our world."—GEORGE A. GORDON, *The Christ of Today*, p. 286.

Preaching is the undying institution of Christianity, and becomes a reality as the preacher's experience is assimilated to the experience of men who have received the revelation before him. "The bullet will hit the mark," says Emerson, "which is first dipped in the marksman's blood." In those experiences of the apostles and prophets were blood and fire and tears and martyrdom, and only as we reproduce their experience shall we attain their results. Thus the revelation of the olden ages is at the same time a test of our reality and the inspiration to our endeavor.

Moreover, Jesus Christ saturated himself with the Old Testament. There was, indeed, a strange novelty in his preaching. As soon as men heard him they cried out: "What new doctrine is this?" He appeared to break with the past; he dared to criticise the old law, and in almost every discussion with the religious leaders of his time he was found on the liberal side. But his new doctrine was rooted in the old history. His character was formed and nourished by the Old Testament. His one great answer to the perplexing questions of his time was a reference to the divine revelation. When men asked him about marriage, he said: "Have ye not read how God made them in the beginning?" When they asked him regarding the Sabbath, he said: "Have ye not read what David did?" When they would perplex him with questions concerning the resurrection, he said: "Have ye not read how God spake to Moses at the bush?" and his stinging condemnation of Pharisaism was: "Ye do *therefore* err, not knowing the Scriptures and the power of God." The Old Testament rose to his lips as naturally as water rises to the mouth of a spring. As the shadow of the cross fell upon him, he cried: "The things which are written must be accomplished in me." In the utter darkness he cried: "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.*" On the way to Emmaus he explained to the two disciples the Scriptures concerning himself. His constant formula was: "It is written." Of course, we might say that, being a Jew, he could not do otherwise than saturate his soul with the Old Testament; but if that Old Testament had not been of preëminent spiritual significance for the life of humanity, then

we may be sure that the soul of Jesus would have instinctively turned from it, as he turned from the precepts of the Pharisees, and the stolid, spiritless performance of the temple worship. The Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus. The Old Testament, which some with absurd timidity seem to think is about to vanish from our modern life, or has become, in the phrase of Goldwin Smith, "the millstone of Christianity," was the chief human aid that Christ had in the development of his own spiritual life, and this one fact makes it forever significant and indispensable to humanity.

Another reason for insisting on the biblical element in preaching is that biblical forms of thought are the most effective forms. The original form is closest to the original truth. We are to beware of the ideas apart from the personality through which they enter the world. No system of abstract ideas is a religion. If the Bible is the story of the training of a race, then the thought-forms through which the race was trained are indispensable in the work of today. It is utter folly to preach from texts ignoring their historic perspective. A minister preached recently a most fervid sermon before a temperance society from the text, "Cut it with the penknife," from which he proceeded to deduce the duty of cutting off evil habits. Every one of us has met with scores of such distortions of the Scripture. But we can, by means of what Professor Phelps calls "expository culture," so saturate our souls with the thought-forms of the Scripture that we shall naturally turn, not to the Greek sophist, but to the Hebrew prophet, for the material and the mode of Christian preaching. By books of travel and geography we can make Palestine as real as our native state; we can create a background and atmosphere which shall illuminate every single passage of the Scripture, and so enrich our minds that we shall never fall back on books of anecdote for spiritual instruction, but the whole sacred Scripture shall radiate its power through all our proclamation. To discourse on the duty of repentance is well, but to show that repentance in Peter and David, and perhaps in Esau, is better. To discourse on abstract benevolence is perhaps sometimes helpful; infinitely

more helpful is it to study Paul's exertions for the poor of Jerusalem—his motives, methods, and results. To preach on the duty of growth is well; to show that growth in the life and teachings of the apostles is immensely more effective. To rebuke bigotry and intolerance is a duty; but to show that intolerance operating in John when he would call down fire from heaven, and then to see it so vanquished by the spirit of Jesus that that same fiery disciple becomes at last the apostle of love—this is to preach Christian charity in a way that shall make it as a nail fastened by a master of assemblies. To preach simply virtue and benevolence and justice and truth is not to be a Christian minister. We are to show these things as they entered the world under the divine tuition, and in such forms of thought that they never can vanish from human consciousness. We are not to expound intellectually the duty of parent and child, but to show the Virgin and the Son in the marvelous beauty of the home in Nazareth. We are not to set forth the philosophic doctrine of the atonement, but to "placard" before the eyes of men Jesus Christ as crucified among them. To picture the three crosses on Calvary is to help the world far more than by the presentation of any doctrine of vicarious sacrifice. To show Jesus at the Last Supper surrounded by the Twelve is to do more for the coming of the kingdom on earth than to preach liberty, equality, fraternity to the end of time.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible also furnishes the preacher with inexhaustible material; the utility of the Bible is the best proof of its inspiration. "I know the Bible is inspired, because it inspires me," says Mr. Moody; and, we may add, no man can know that fact in any other way. The Bible gives us a spiritual vocabulary—a series of concepts which are practically inexhaustible. The songs of the Bible must be sung again through every preacher and in every tongue; the sermons of the Bible must be repitched in every nation under heaven, not by vain and servile imitation, but by the absorption of their moral passion. The types of thought

<sup>2</sup>"The Tübingen criticism failed, because it neither discovered nor cared to discover the Person that created the processes it described. Paul was more important than Jesus. Impersonal tendencies were greater than conscious persons."—FAIRBAIRN'S *Place of Christ in Modern Theology*, p. 273.

furnished in the Scripture are manifold, and the preacher who cannot preach one of the apostles can preach another. Paul gives us one type of thought—that which has hitherto been dominant in the Christian church. Peter frankly says that in that beloved brother are “some things hard to be understood”—an admission which has endeared the apostle Peter to thousands of Christians. John has nothing to say about the central concepts of Paul, nor does he view the church from the standpoint of Peter, but from his own standpoint proclaims a message forever individual, yet forever fundamentally harmonious with that of his colleagues.

Again, the Bible gives us truth in its true proportions. Preaching is not simply proclaiming a series of truths, but it is presenting those truths in their divinely intended balance and symmetry. If we make prominent in our preaching what has small space in the Bible, and neglect that which has great space in the Bible, then it must follow that just because our Bible has gripped the conscience of humanity, our preaching will fail to do so. The weakness of old New England preaching was that it gave the most space to that which in the Bible occupies least attention. It made prominent what is logically important, but practically of little value. It set forth with ponderous rhetoric that which would be all-essential if we were expounding a theodicy, but that which may be well-nigh neglected if we are seeking to save men. Our mission is, not to justify the ways of God to men, but to rectify the ways of men to God; our preaching is a gospel, not a theodicy. If the Bible gives much space to metaphysics, then we should do the same; otherwise not. If the Bible gives much space to original sin and the fall of man, we should do the same; otherwise not. The federal headship of Adam *may* be enormously important in a system of theology, but since Adam himself is never mentioned by Christ, and only two or three times in the entire New Testament, he cannot be a very important factor in Christian preaching. The virgin birth of Christ most Christians accept. It may be a very important part of the Christian creed, it may be essential to Christian theology, but if it is mentioned in only two gospels and entirely



ignored in the whole apostolic proclamation, it cannot be essential in the preaching of today. If the apostles gave their time to reconciling science and religion, we may justly believe that the growth of the kingdom depends on our doing the same. If they could get along without this, it seems possible that some of us might profitably follow their example. If the Bible gives much space to explaining the mysteries of creation in the far past, or publishing a programme of divine action in the future, we may well give our time to doctrines of cosmology and eschatology; but if the Bible is mainly concerned in bringing eternity to bear on the present time, then we must do the same. Some years ago a complete analysis of the Holy Bible was issued by Roswell D. Hitchcock, accompanied with copious indexes to the entire Scriptures. In these indexes was just one reference to the kingdom of heaven, which is mentioned in the gospels more than a hundred times, and forms the fundamental conception of Jesus; but this has almost totally dropped out of modern preaching.<sup>3</sup> The proportion of faith must be the biblical proportion, if we expect the power which once followed the proclamation of the holy men of old.

The Bible also gives us truth at maximum intensity; it is passionate, vehement, enthusiastic, pungent, and compelling. Marvelous is the irony of Isaiah, as he pictures men fashioning a graven image, and falling down to the stock of a tree and saying: "Thou art my God." How awful is his reverence as he cries: "Here am I, send me." How marvelous is the tenderness of Hosea, as through his broken home and domestic tragedy there streams into his soul a vision of the forgiving love of God! How tremendous is the passionate cursing of the imprecatory psalms, which in times of peace we expurgate for dainty congregations, and which, when reading of the woes of Armenia and the atrocities of the Turk, we find all too weak to express our Christian indignation! How rapturous and magnificent is the vision of John, as from his rocky island he looks out over the tossing Ægean and catches glimpses of the time when the kingdoms

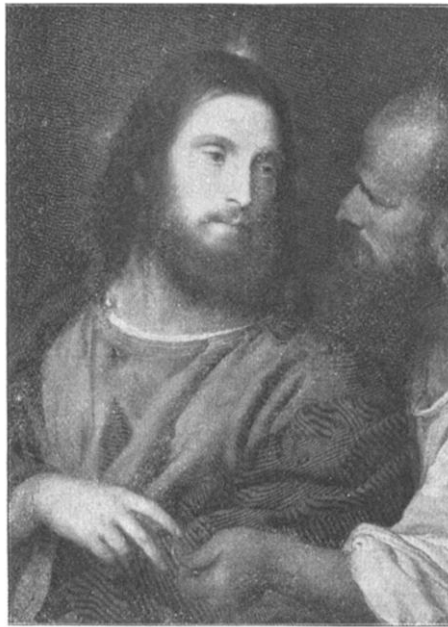
<sup>3</sup> In DR. SHEDD'S *Theology*, if I recollect rightly, three pages are devoted to heaven and over eighty pages to hell — hardly a biblical proportion!

of this world, east and west, Roman, Egyptian, Assyrian, are to become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ! The man who has drawn truth from such sources will never present it as a dried formula, but will always feel his soul on fire as he proclaims it. He has felt a virtue that is passionate, and a message which will give him no rest. He knows "in what a forge and what a heat were shaped the anchors of our hope."

One more reason we have for insisting upon the biblical element in preaching. This alone will save us from the perils which constantly surround us. This will save us from the secularism which would often substitute discourses on modern novels, on drainage, on tenement-house reform, on the advantages of the bicycle, for the prophetic message which has melted the heart of the generations. This alone will save us from ranting and mere exhortation. We shall deem it a crime to arouse men's emotions for any other purpose than to shape their life. We shall "value no feeling which is not the child of truth and the parent of duty." This will save us from the philosophic essay, icily regular, splendidly null; from the polishing of sentences and the carving of cherry stones, when we should be shaping souls. It will make us understand why such men as William M. Taylor and John Hall were called across the water by a generation that was weary of arid acres of theological discussion. It will bring us into vital sympathy with Robertson, whose every sermon grew out of the Bible as a plant grows out of the seed; with Phillips Brooks, who, though so intensely modern, never found a sermon until he had first found a text; with Alexander Maclaren, whose inexhaustible wealth comes, not from "wells of English undefiled," not from a study of the great thinkers of the world, but from daily communion with the biblical teachers, apostles, and martyrs who, through faith, have subdued kingdoms and put to flight armies of aliens.

The words of Matthew Arnold, written for all truth-seekers, have a special cogency for the preacher of today: "As long as the world lasts, all who want to make progress in righteousness will come to Israel for inspiration, as to the people who have had the sense for righteousness most glowing and strongest, and,

in hearing and reading the words of Israel, carers for conduct will find a glow and a force they will find nowhere else. As well imagine a man with a sense for sculpture not cultivating it with the help of Greek art, or a man with a sense for poetry not cultivating it with the help of Homer and Shakespeare, as a man with a sense for conduct not cultivating it with the help of the Bible."



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